

Breach of Trust: How Americans Failed Their Soldiers and Their Country by Andrew J. Bacevich. Published by Metropolitan Books, A Division of Henry Holt And Co. NY, 2013 (238 pages) Reviewed by Jeong Lee for Small Wars Journal

The United States has been mired in unwinnable protracted wars in the Greater Middle East for twelve years and running. Despite having eliminated Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, the United States Armed Forces seems unable to win wars it has begun over a decade ago. Although there has been a plethora of books and articles written about the permanent war and the "national security state" supposedly concocted by the Washington elite, many fail to examine the ethical dimensions of the ongoing war that has become untenable.

In his latest book, *Breach of Trust: How Americans Failed Their Soldiers and Their Country*, the retired Army Colonel and Boston University historian Andrew Bacevich delves into the implications of frayed civil-military relations for America's geopolitical strategy and the well-being of America's democracy. The "decoupling of the people from the war" worries Bacevich, because he believes that the solution ultimately lies with the informed and involved citizenry.[1]

The author is merciless towards those whom he deems responsible for the quagmire in the Greater Middle East. George W. Bush and the Neocons are blamed for having "depleted the nation's stores of moral capital leaving in its wake cynicism and malaise along with chronic dysfunction." [2] Of President Obama's foreign policy, he discerns in the President's predilection for covert operation echoes of Nixon's "proclivity for skullduggery and dirty tricks." [3] In a chapter entitled "Searching for Dragons to Slay," the professor jabs at the officer corps for "conjur[ing] up new dangers to which only Abe's army could offer the necessary response." [4] Pundits and academics are also collectively blamed for their pliancy and passivity.

However, he reserves his harshest criticism for the apathetic citizenry for exacerbating the current crisis. Indeed, in the author's attempts to answer the question, "But who exactly was this we?" [5] one finds throughout the book a recurrent motif at work. Those familiar with the professor's previous books may recall the formulaic refrain that Bush wanted as much as possible for the American public to forget that they were engaged in a war. [6] And since the public saw no need to foot the bill or sacrifice their own lives for the lofty cause, "war became exclusively the province of the state rather than the country as a whole." [7] This decoupling in Bacevich's view is pernicious because it bankrupts the nation, thereby, forcing our posterity to pay for the permanent war. [8]

As he had done in his previous books, Bacevich employs historical analysis to identify the origins of the public detachment from America's wars. He contends that whereas Franklin Roosevelt masterfully prosecuted a people's war during World War II, [9] after the war, maintaining two types of army—one drawn from conscripts and another made up of professional soldiers—became unsustainable due to the unpredictable nature of the postwar wars. [10] The failures of the dual tradition became manifest during the Vietnam War. As Bacevich puts it: "Counterinsurgency abroad [in Southeast Asia] found their counterpart in insurgency within" in the form of open insubordination, drug problems and racial tension. [11]

Bacevich notes that although Richard Nixon might have accurately gauged the prevalent public zeitgeist by terminating the draft, ending the conscription ironically provided him with the latitude to escalate the war in Southeast Asia. [12] More importantly, Nixon's decision to repeal the draft had far-reaching consequences for the future of America's geostrategic posture in that the All Volunteer Force (AVF) eventually came to underestimate its adversaries. That is, since the AVF fancied that it had successfully redeemed its reputation in the aftermath of the Gulf War, both the public and the officer corps alike came to believe that America's extant military capability was more than sufficient for destroying third-rate armies. [13] When the military proved

incapable of ending wars it started, both Bush and Obama privatized the conflicts by turning to unscrupulous mercenary firms to fight alongside the troops.[14]

Even though I agree with most of Bacevich's arguments, I find flawed his assertion that the American citizens remain indifferent to America's misguided foreign policy because they are content to let the military to do the fighting for them. Such argument underestimates the pervasive public skepticism against American commitments overseas. If vociferous public outcry against intervention in Syria offers any proof, it is worth noting that according to the August NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll, 60 percent of those surveyed believed that Congress should oppose armed intervention. What explains this fierce opposition, according to Robert W. Merry of the National Interest, may be the collective awakening of the public to the possibility that the Washington elites may have "led the nation astray" on foreign policy initiatives. Simply put, even if American citizens choose not to serve, they still have their "skin in the game."

Despite Bacevich's flawed premise that the American public at large remains oblivious to America's ill-conceived entanglements abroad, Bacevich's analyses in this book are nonetheless spot-on. Events in Af-Pak and in Iraq demonstrate that the United States Armed Forces had been incapable of winning protracted counterinsurgency campaigns in the Greater Middle East or successfully exporting its freedom agenda. Equally important, the war on terror offers us an object lesson on the limits of imperial might and the attendant costs of occupying sovereign countries not our own. The Iraq War alone cost the United States \$1.7 trillion and eventually squandered the goodwill of America's allies

Most importantly, Breach of Trust disabuses the readers of the mistaken belief that an institution as undemocratic as the United States Armed Forces can and should be used to spread American democratic ideals. In so doing, this weighty book forces its readers to ponder what corrective measures, if any, the public can take to ensure that the United States never veers off its ideals and *raison d'être*.

I believe that the answer may not necessarily lie in serving the nation as the professor suggests, but in being informed and in being vocal to keep the powers that be accountable. Such is the essence of what it means to be an active citizen.

[1] Andrew Bacevich, *Breach of Trust: How Americans Failed Their Soldiers and Their Country* Metropolitan Books, A Division of Henry Holt And Co. NY, 2013, p. 32

[2] *ibid.*, p. 29

[3] *ibid.*, pp. 126

[4] *ibid.*, pp.84

[5] *ibid.*, pp. 29

[6] *ibid.*, pp. 30

[7] *ibid.*, pp. 32

[8] *ibid.*, pp. 35

[9] *ibid.*, pp. 27

[10] *ibid.*, pp. 49-50

[11] *ibid.*, pp. 52

[12] *ibid.*, pp. 57

[13] *ibid.*, pp. 98

[14] See Chapter 9